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ABSTRACT

Policy statements give a framework to decision-making power, clarify issues, regulate relationships, and assist in the resolution of differences of opinion. It is essential that a school board provide direction through a well-conceived and well-developed policy. If there is unwillingness to implement policy, a real or perceived vacuum is created within the school community. Strategic policy formulations include the following common elements: (1) situations; (2) existing policy; (3) past decisions; (4) present congruency or gap between situations and policy; and (5) future speculations and policy implications. These common elements are described and diagrammed so that policymakers can include the needed steps in policy dynamics. The situation of early retirement is used to work through the diagrams of policy formation. Suggestions are given to analyze present school policies. (MLF)

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# POLICYMAKING IN A VACUUM

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# Policymaking in a Vacuum

A policy is a statement, either written or unwritten, that gives a framework to the decision-making power. A policy also provides a structure for employee job expectations, helps to resolve operational issues, and brings forth a check and balance system between school board members, administrators, faculty, and staff. Policies clarify issues, regulate relationships, and assist in the resolution of differences of opinion.

Well-developed school policies set direction, keep staff on target, provide a sense of purpose, maintain a collection of interpersonal rules, lay a foundation for good personnel practices, and, finally, set financial parameters for a school district.

In the absence of clear, well-developed policy, a school district may face chaos, difficult interpersonal relationships, decisions which are unpredictable, and staff dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is essential that a competent school board provide direction through a well-developed and well-conceived policy.

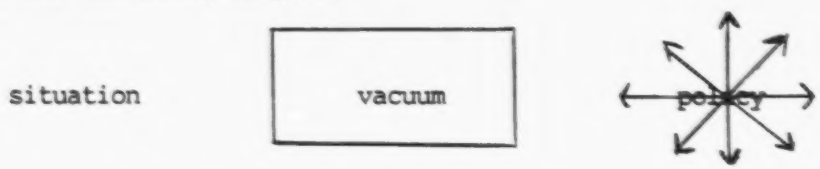
Given the fact that policies are essential, the authors have chosen to state what policy is <u>not</u>. Policy is not a solution to every problem. Policy is not a tool for making a decision on everyday operational matters. Policy is not a short-term collection of statements which are set in granite, and, finally, policy is not a mission statement but rather a set of rules and regulations that evolve out of a strong mission statement.

There are reasons for having well-developed school policies. Policies set direction to keep everybody on target. Policies provide the staff with a sense of purpose and an inherent set of impersonal rules. Policies have

foundations for hiring and firing of personnel. Finally, policies have underlying financial parameters for the school district.

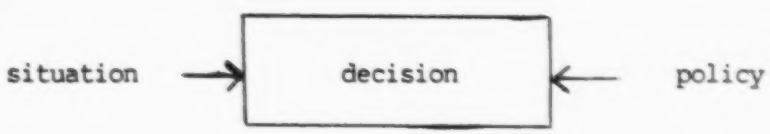
If there is unwillingness to implement school policy, a vacuum is created within the school community. The meaning of vacuum for this article is a void or gap of substantial policy. It can be a real or perceived vacuum which leaves people with an undue feeling of being in a quandry. A vacuum may exist because people want too much or too little information to act on policy matters. A vacuum may cause long, frequent, and mundane board meetings. In essence, a vacuum is the separation between situation(s) and policy.

A vacuum exists when there are walls between situations and policy. It looks like the following diagram:




In this context, the policy takes 360° turns. The vacuum causes a void between situations and policy. This void affects decisions as being aimless.

In overcoming school vacuums, situations become more fused with policy. The decision becomes the focal point rather than a vacuum. The diagram now looks like:



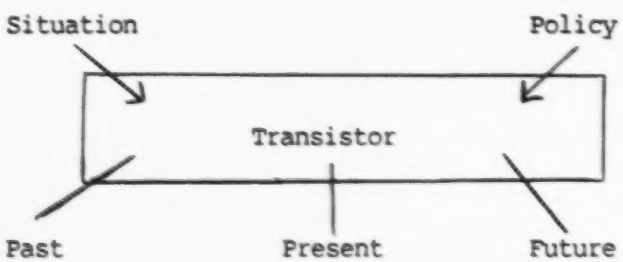

Policy has more stability and direction.

The purpose of this article is to explore common elements in strategic policy formulations. The common elements will be described and diagrammed

so that policymakers would include the needed steps in policy dynamics. Lastly, the reader will be given suggestions to analyze present school policies.

The common policy elements include situations, policy, past, present, and future. Situation pertains to any matter that requires a decision. Policy is a process that has predeterminations for any school situation. The past is the track record of past decisions. The present is the current congruency or gap between situations and policy. The future is a speculation of what is likely to occur and has policy implications.

Policy formulation is like making use of an electronic transistor. The situational and policy waves are gathered into the transistor. The transistor becomes functional through the use of the prongs of the past, present, and future. It looks like the following diagram:




The prongs of the past, present, and future have solid connections. The past prong has access to all past information and can be retrieved within a moment. This information is vast, and it helped us to get to where we are. We can be grateful to use past information as a basis to update policy.

The present prong is the vital concern of policymakers. This information stems from current issues that need decisions. This prong can be

perplexing because of possible new departures from past decisions. The present becomes a small view of emerging information of the future. The present prong has to function or the whole transistor will be adversely affected.

The future prong has access to unknown data. It projects past and present information into forecasted decisions. This prong is likely to receive a lot of negative feedback due to unsettled knowledge. Consensus of projected policy is needed to make this prong work effectively.

We have chosen the situation of early retirement to work through the diagram of policy formulation. We conclude that many vacuums exist with this current issue. We realize that such vacuums will exist until some of the following questions are handled:

1. Why do anything until we are forced to make a decision?
2. What are the cost factors?
3. Will this action expedite needed change?
4. Will new "blood" be great for our schools?
5. Why make any judgments until we settle the written grievance on class size?
6. Won't this be a great way to rid ourselves of some tenured teachers?
7. What might we do if there is an impending teacher shortage?
8. How might we handle such critical teaching areas as math, science, foreign language, and vocational subject areas?

To solve the dilemma of the above example, a set of suggestions are provided which may assist in laying down the general principles for developing a good policy. These suggestions require that adequate information be made available to the decision-makers regarding the past, the present, and the anticipated future. It also requires that individuals be willing to

reach a decision as to what can or cannot be done and be willing to stand behind these decisions. To maintain a viable administrative staff and to provide credibility with faculty, policies must be viewed by board members, administration, and faculty as fair, equitable, and impersonal. With this in mind, the following suggestions may be of some benefit in providing direction for good policy development.

Suggestions

1. School policies need to be developed, updated, and implemented with decisions overcoming vacuums created by past, present, and future situations.
2. School policies need a base of acceptance to be workable.
3. Substance and procedure are written as policy to set directions for the school system.
4. School policies need to be written in concise, clear, and functional language.
5. School policy involves real and potential issues that have two sides of built-in biases.
6. One complaint does not void policy--expect more than one complaint.
7. School policy does not please 100% of the people 100% of the time.
8. Policymaking can be an effective and efficient use of school board time.
9. Board members hopefully will consider more forecasting future situations to validate present policies.
10. School policy is an approach for consistent decisions.
11. Board policy eliminates vacuums created with the school community.
12. The board should devote more time and energy for school policy.

## Conclusion

Board members are a vital link between school district voters and school administrators. Board members are elected by property owners to oversee the school and guide the operation. Policy should reflect the philosophy of the community and should be carefully evaluated and reviewed regularly. The board needs to assure that the policies comply with laws, rules, and regulations of the school district. The board is responsible for developing and approving policies relating to school management and other critical aspects of the school enterprise.